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Kristian Petersen
kjpetersen@unomaha.edu

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UNIVERSITY OF
Nebraska
Omaha

A Social History of Iranian Cinema

Abstract

This is a book review of *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 1: The Artisanal Era, 1897-1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941-1978* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 3: The Islamicate Period, 1978-1984* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); and *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 4: The Globalizing Era, 1984-2010* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), all by Hamid Naficy.

Author Notes

Kristian Petersen is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Nebraska Omaha. His research and teaching interests include Theory and Methodology in the Study of Religion, Islamic Studies, Chinese Religions, and Media Studies.

In 2012, Asghar Farhadi won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film for *A Separation* (2011). In accepting the award he was well aware that an international audience would realign their gaze upon Iran and its cinema with a new appreciation after that evening. He said:

At this time, many Iranians all over the world are watching us and I imagine them to be very happy. They are happy not just because of an important award or a film or filmmaker, but because at the time when talk of war, intimidation, and aggression is exchanged between politicians, the name of their country Iran is spoken here through her glorious culture, a rich and ancient culture that has been hidden under the heavy dust of politics. I proudly offer this award to the people of my country, a people who respect all cultures and civilizations and despise hostility and resentment (v.4 p. 260).

While this “glorious culture” was being revealed to many outsiders for the first time, Iranians and their admirers were well aware of a rich century-long tradition of cinema. The four-volume *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* traces this history, its major contributors and productions, and the socio-political contexts within which it emerged from its beginnings until the eve of *A Separation*. Altogether, the comprehensively detailed, theoretically informed, and narratively enjoyable *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* can only be described as extensive, expansive, and essential.

Collectively the four volumes provide a history of the social, political, and aesthetic threads that shaped Iranian cinema, its productions, and its audiences from roughly 1897–2010. However, this “social history” is so much more than just that. Hamid Naficy, renowned professor of Iranian cinema at Northwestern University, combines a narrative history shaped by archival materials with deep critical readings of individual films, Iranian audience and critics’ responses, production and distribution details, reactionary government policies, as well as relevant autobiographical episodes from his own journey discovering Iranian cinema for over five decades. The four texts are structured chronologically and divided based primarily on major political shifts. Naficy considers these developments within the context of the evolution of the film industry, demarcated by The

Artisanal Era, 1897-1941; The Industrializing Years, 1941-1978; The Islamicate Period, 1978-1984; and the The Globalizing Era, 1984-2010. Throughout each volume he skillfully weaves strings from particular moments into the thematic developments that emerge across temporal periods. The overarching concern of the collection is the dialogic relationship between national and cultural identity, Westernization, and modernity. Naficy argues that Iranian modernity was distinctive from the West while being in critical dialogue with it and that the development of Iranian cinematic culture played a crucial role in consigning it specific characteristics. Due to the importance of this continued thesis readers would benefit from exploring volume one's introduction, "National Cinema, Modernity, and Iranian National Identity" (v.1 pp. 1-25), even if they are only interested in a later historical period. Otherwise, each volume is intended to stand on its own and need not be read in conversation with the remaining volumes.

In terms of the collection's place in the study of religion in film a few notices should be made at the outset. If one is interested in thinking through cinema from a cross-cultural perspective and seeks to speak not only to their peers in Religious Studies but also those working in Film and Cultural Studies then Naficy's work will be invaluable. He serves as a model of scholarship that is at once historically grounded within global and local contexts, and theoretically rich with sophisticated analyses of filmic texts. His interpretation of the cultural maturation of Iranian cinema is informed by the works of theorists such as Benedict Anderson, Roland Barthes, Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Eric Hobsbawm, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Gayatri Spivak, and many others. The historical narrative presented to the reader situates Iranian cinema and the evolution of its local film industry within both the long legacy of Iranian performative and visual arts, while also paying special attention to the international structural influences of western cinema that shaped what Iranians produced and viewed. For these reasons, Naficy's work is exemplary for

providing us not only with the most comprehensive portrait of Iranian cinema to date but also with a template for producing the highest quality scholarship on religion in film.

Due to the magnitude of Naficy's project (1968 pages altogether) and the availability of excellent traditional book reviews (Michelle Langford, Roxanne Marcotte, Pedram Partovia, Sara Saljoughi, and Arezou Zalipour) the remainder of my thoughts will be focused on how his work will benefit the student of religion in film. In exploring how *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* illuminates the religious dimensions of Iranian Cinema I focus on three themes: religious minorities, the role of women, and Islam.

Religious Minorities

While today Iran is almost exclusively associated with Islam, from the beginning several minority religious populations were instrumental to the development of Iranian cinema. Iranian culture has never been monolithic and Naficy demonstrates the crucial roles of Jews, Baha'is, Christian Armenians, Zoroastrians, and western Christian missionaries in the establishment of cinematic culture. During the late Qajar and Pahlavi periods (1897–1978) these communities generally felt the effects of second-class citizenship and were relegated to undesirable social activities. Throughout the twentieth century religious minorities were often obstructed from entering various professional industries, but the cultural production associated with the film industry was frequently dismissed by the Muslim majority populations, which created an opportunity for minority religious communities to succeed. These successes were fostered by the cosmopolitan qualities of minority group members, including the ability to speak foreign languages, business acumen, and transnational connections. Minority communities were also film spectators and thus became the target of western missionizing activities, which often rested on the assumption that these

communities would be the easiest to convert. The impact of foreign films highlights the cultural exchange illuminated through the relationships between minority communities, foreigners, expatriates, and immigrants.

In the mid-twentieth century, most minority communities were officially recognized as state-protected religions and were given a certain amount of protection in the production of film. For example, official regulations prohibited “casting aspersion on and defaming the country’s minority religions and beliefs” or “making fun of the language or dialects of Iranian ethnoreligious minorities or of those living in the provinces for the sole purpose of laughing at or humiliating them and in such a way that leads to no positive outcome” (v.2 pp. 192-3). However, immediately following the 1978–79 Islamic Revolution religious minorities suffered from the deconstruction of Iranian society because of their participation in activities like banking, the liquor business, and film production and exhibition. When the Shiite theocracy was formulated some minorities were acknowledged by the state and were allowed some autonomy in terms of language and religious practice, while others were legally persecuted leading to massive emigration. Jews and Baha’is were the central focus of these outcomes and frequent filmic vilification. These were countered by émigré documentaries created outside of Iran that appealed to a global audience about the plight of religious minority communities in Iran. Some minority communities used the greater protection to better self-represent themselves and quickly began to produce local narrative documentaries that preserved an independent mediated self-image. Most recently, Iranian cinema in the diaspora has opened up opportunities for minority film and media and the exploration of religious minority communities’ transnational connections. The production of ethnoreligious media was largely due to the exile population being made up of significant minority religious community members that are proportionally larger than that of Iranian Muslims abroad.

The takeaway for readers is that the influence of religious minorities is found at each stage and location in the history of Iranian cinematic culture. We must remember, “their contributions, however, were not based on religious but on professional and commercial grounds” (13). An examination of Iran’s religious minorities serves as a reminder that the study of religion and film is not always a search for meaning but about communities, identities, and how individuals navigate the world. We find a similar social transformation for women in Iranian film and within cinematic culture.

Women

While Iranian women have had a complex relationship within cinema and in front of the movie screen, they structure how we must examine the history of Iranian cinema. Historically speaking, we see broad currents of representation and appearance relevant for the study of religion in film: women’s absence (Qajar era), sexualized bodies (Pahlavi period), desexualized and veiled presence (Islamic Republic period), and the politics and poetics of veiling (post-1990s). Naficy’s work here will be especially appreciated by those working within frameworks of gender, religion, and film, both in terms of global cinematic history and readings of the filmic text.

During the Qajar period, film exhibition was generally limited to the elite, and since it was constrained to the royal court or upper-class homes, women’s presence either on or in front of the screen did not pose immediate obstacles. On occasions when film did reach the mass public, religious conservatives advocated for its “purification,” as with the first act of cinematic censorship. In 1904, the first commercial movie house, Cheraq Gaz Street Cinema, was shut down within a month of opening because a chief cleric, Shaikh Fazlollah Nuri, disapproved of the screening of unveiled foreign women to an all-male audience. Censorship of the female body was

a continuous theme that emerged throughout the four volumes of *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*.

When moviegoing opened up to a general viewing public during the Pahlavi periods, women were at the center of debates. While female actors and spectators were more widely accepted, religious leaders continued to question their presence on moral grounds. Representations of women were also complicated. In 1936, the state-sponsored “women’s awakening movement” banned women from wearing the veil, which was variably received by the Iranian public. For many, veiled women signified the inertia of tradition. Others saw it as carrying out religious obligations. Either way, male sexual desire was socially justified by the unavailability of women through veiling and segregation. By extension, the “modern” unveiled woman was publicly portrayed as the sum of western excesses and moral corruption, thus serving the dual role of fulfilling male passions and asserting an Iranian modernity that was its own. In line with religious conservatives, Iranian sexual anxiety was displayed through public images of women as sexually promiscuous or westernized dolls. For example, local low-budget commercial cinema, *filmfarsi*, literally “Persian film,” continued the excessive displays of female eroticism, relying on singing and dancing, often in nightclub settings, which provided a focus for the male gaze and the objectification of female bodies. Through cinematic images gender norms were “modernized” in terms of western ideals and were demarcated through representations of heteronormativity. At the same time, homosexuality was deemed deviant and suppressed publicly, running counter to historical Iranian male-to-male homosociality. These formulations of sexual identities also aligned with conservative religious leaders.

Despite the ongoing role women played during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, it was not until the Islamic Republic period that they became prominent film directors themselves.

Of course, there were constraints on how women could appear on screen. After the revolution, representations of women were covered, serving both as a new social norm (veiling was made legally required in July 1980) and as a critique of the hypersexualized cinematic female body of the previous regime. Within this context, Naficy offers an Islamicate theory of the gaze through the reading of cinematic texts, whereby viewing unveiled or immodest women transforms moral males into corrupt subjects. New cinematic women were purified, initially through their removal and structured absence in films during the early 1980s. During the warring years of the mid-1980s, women returned but were largely domesticated and served as a backdrop in the homes or lives of male counterparts. In the late 1980s, women began to take on leading roles and were placed in dynamic drama. This renewed presence also revived religious surveillance and bans. Since the mid-1990s, filmmakers have transgressed and subverted social norms, giving new perspectives on women's agency, bodies, and sexualities. Overall, the regime's enforcement of modesty did not block female directors from asserting their own vision of identity. And, as I suggested above, women were at the center of the configurations of religion, gender, nation, modernity, and identity throughout the history of Iranian cinema.

Islam

As one might assume, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* also provides a rich detailed account of how interpretations of Islam shape cinematic culture. During the Qajar and Islamic periods, religious sensibilities substantially structured how people were presented on screen, how they viewed films, and the production of cinema. Even during the Pahlavi period traditionalist Muslim leaders challenged governmental social reform programs, which further enabled the loosening of cinematic restrictions. Throughout the four volumes we hear about how the dominant religious

establishments tried to maintain or steer public values away from westernization and secular practices. And while Muslim clerics were more often than not disapproving of cinematic culture (issuing cinematic *fatwas*), many could not ignore the potential rewards of film. The founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini, upon his return from a 14-year exile, said:

We are not opposed to cinema, to radio, or to television ... The cinema is a modern invention that ought to be used for the sake of educating the people, but as you know, it was used instead to corrupt our youth. It is the misuse of cinema that we are opposed to, a misuse caused by the treacherous policies of our rulers (v.2 pp. 7-8).

During the first decade of the Republic, the reconfiguration of film composition underwent a “purification” process whereby conservative Muslim sensibilities structured the cinematic habits of producers and consumers. Various technical and discursive techniques were employed to repurpose and realign cinema with the dominant ideological stance of the state. New institutions were established that limited the field of production through censorship laws, regulations, and “morality codes.” However, in the post-revolutionary period, and especially after the political phase under Khomeini, who died in 1989, the spectrum of possible genres was broadened and experimentation ensued.

On the global film scene, foreigners were beginning to be introduced to Iranian films at international festivals and through the work of directors in the diaspora (what Naficy calls “accented” or “displaced cinema”). Noteworthy here, is that many of these new productions were haunted by the specter of religion. For most foreigners, Iran’s revolution and the hostage crisis marked their understanding of the culture. Iran’s art-house cinema was contradictory to the general assumptions and expectations western audiences held about the Republic, viewing it as a conservative Islamic state. Cinema was no longer under the tight control of the Islamic Republic and contemporary film developed into cosmopolitan productions that often reflected the broader social world. Religion’s absence, then, is a key theme that runs through much of modern Iranian

cinema because it is at once structuring everyday life while also being placed as background *mise-en-scène* rather than a primary narrative feature. This dialectic between Islam, secularism, transnationalism, identity, and modernity makes contemporary Iranian filmmakers so engaging. Naficy offers unique readings of a variety of films and places their interpretation by both local and international audiences in creative dialogue. Overall, Islam often functioned in interesting and shifting ways in Iranian film as it developed in the twenty-first century.

In the end, whether taken together or on their own, the texts reviewed here provide the richest history of Iranian cinema available and will be indispensable for the scholar of religion in film into the distant future. Naficy offers a spectrum of analytical strategies for thinking through religion in film discourses and cinematic culture. One of the most consequential effects of this reader's encounter with *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* was in terms of how we approach our subjects. Naficy was not only concerned with a search for meaning through readings of film as texts but he also incorporated the histories of religious peoples and how their identities shape those histories, even if their religious beliefs or practices did not directly inform those trajectories. We are left with a useful model for the explanatory examination of social practices tied to the various entities related to cinematic culture.